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Creative Writing

Mrs. Graham

9/4/11

A Thank You

“There’s this band Hannah’s nuts about called Radiohead. I’ve been listening to them for a while now and they’re really good. We should try and get some of their albums,” Abe persuaded. No, I thought, not another band. I was already a fan of Coldplay- the best in the world. I could only handle one at a time. What kind of name is Radiohead anyway? Surely they were just a small, unpopular, mediocre-

“You know, if it wasn’t for Radiohead, Coldplay wouldn’t exist,” Abe smirked.

“What do you mean?” I nearly snapped at him unintentionally.

“They copied everything off of Radiohead.”

Not true. I refused for that comment to be true. Coldplay’s music was heavenly; it got me through so much. It had to be original. No other band was superior. Yet, Abe’s birthday was coming up soon. So I supposed that I would be a good sister and buy every album this Radiohead band had so he would stop talking about them. He could have them as his own dumb, little band and I would have Coldplay. How amusing that thought was- we both had our own little bands that were just as competitive as we were as siblings.

For the months that followed previous to his birthday, my dad and I practically made it an adventure to collect each and every last one of Radiohead’s CDs. The first one was easiest because it was their latest album at the time, In Rainbows. The hunt for the other albums was then a blur- Pablo Honey, The Bends, OK Computer, Amnesiac, and Hail to The Thief. When it was finally Abe’s birthday, I held the bag of CDs up proudly in that “I’m a better and more caring sibling than you” sense. He looked shocked but before I knew it, he had already taken the bag and was happily rifling through our findings.

“Wow this is great but wait- where’s Kid A?” Abe looked up confused.

“What’s Kid A?” I returned his expression as my smugness evaporated.

Abe sighed, “It’s alright. I just…I was watching this interview with Thom Yorke about when they created Kid A and well I guess I got ahead of myself. That album is really hard to find because it’s arguably their best. Thanks for the rest though.”

My brother tried to give me a comforting smile but all I saw was a new challenge to accept. I would get this Kid A album, I would show Abe! Which I did succeed in doing, my faint memory of its purchase was the cashier looking at the album and back to my fourteen-year-old self and smiling “Great choice.”

When I finally had everything to give to Abe, we both decided to do the traditional thing my family did whenever anyone bought a CD and synced it to our main computer so we could all listen to it whenever. I’m not sure if that should be unusual- an entire family enticed in music and willing to share each other’s current favorites. Yet I guess if I told you I was from a Senegalese culture that used music for almost every type of celebration, you would understand that I need music to feel like a person. I always have, and it is the same for my brother and dad. As for my mom, she probably feels the same way but just doesn’t have a set of favorite musicians like we do. At the time though, I felt like everything was in order- my dad’s favorite band was U2, mine was Coldplay, and Abe was this new Radiohead band.

Radiohead was uploaded to my mp3 out of curiosity. I wanted to know what was so special about them, why anyone could say they influenced my favorite band in the world. So I started with the song “Knives Out” from Amnesiac. It showed like Coldplay on steroids; absolutely amazing. So I tried another one- “Reckoner” from In Rainbows. It was beautiful, I couldn’t even explain it. Coldplay’s songs were amazing but their structure was always predictable. As were most bands I heard. I figured musicians were supposed to have a structure in their music. Yet, the more and more I listened to Radiohead I realized it wasn’t the case. Of course, because I was still a hard-headed eighth grader, it took until really my sophomore year of high school for me to get off my high horse and actually listen and accept every still Radiohead song from the alternative rock genre of Pablo Honey, The Bends, and OK Computer to their electronic and jazzy genre of Kid A, Amnesiac, and Hail to The Thief and finally their mixture of just about every musical genre known to man in their B-sides and their two latest albums In Rainbows and The King of Limbs.

Like I had mentioned before, it was always music that made me feel like a person. Since I was a toddler, my dad used to play music from the Senegalese musician Youssou N’Dour and tape me dancing hysterically to each song so he could send the videos back to our long-distance relatives. I loved listening to Youssou N’Dour more than anything, I loved my culture, and I loved being different. However, when I moved here from my birthplace in Connecticut, I was enrolled in Fairview Elementary School. The kids there were obviously Americanized since none of their came from immigrant families like me. I was constantly teased for not understand the American culture and it came to the point where I was just sick of it and decided to conform. I started by listening to songs on the radio. Truthfully, they were all awful to me, even as an elementary student. Yet, for the sake of fitting in, I continued to learn to enjoy radio songs and rap artists that were popular amongst my peers. I never felt whole during that time.

Things eased a bit for me though when my brother Abe introduced me to Coldplay’s first music video- Chris Martin walking on a beach from dusk to dawn as he sang their single “Yellow”. I was enchanted by Coldplay; they sounded nothing like the artists did on the radio- purer and more relative. Of course I still listened to U2 as well but to me it was my dad’s band, not mine. Also, since I had to go through most of my early childhood with “Sunday Bloody Sunday” and “New Year’s Day” blasting through my house or out of my dad’s car stereo, could you really blame me for not congregating much interest in them?

Then, it was Radiohead. They became my band. I could have cared less what Abe though at that point, they were mine too. Just like how I started to truly appreciate them, it was sophomore year when I decided to learn more about the members. Maybe this was because I subconsciously wanted to figure how what in their lives made them produce such amazing things. I first started with the lead singer, Thom Yorke. The man I saw in eighth grade as I peered over Abe’s shoulder as the wonky-eyed weird guy in concerts and interviews. He seemed on edge, annoyingly passionate, and an elitist. I currently hate myself for once thinking like that. The truth is he couldn’t be any closer to my personality. He is the person I want to be, which is amazing because I’ve never believed in role models. Then again, I used to think there was no band better than Coldplay- something I laugh at today.

There’s an interesting study at the University of New South Wales that talks about how miserable lives actually make the most creative and open-minded people. I would completely agree with it. Since I was a kid, I was teased for everything that made me who I am today. I used to tell myself that I was different from my bullies because I would at least be hardened and nicer in the future. Also, I told myself when people are in isolation, they tend to think more than those who are able to be social. This is because those who have nothing to be hated for are too preoccupied in their abundant amount of friends and activities to sit and think about the world around them. I had nothing else but to think. Is it unfair? I used to think so, but maybe we need people to suffer to become those Thom Yorkes that others can look up to and call brilliant.

Thom Yorke was born on October 7th, 1968 in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, England. He was the first child in his family and when once asked about his first few years on Earth he explained, “When I was born, my left eye was completely paralyzed. My eyelid was permanently shut and they thought it would be like that for the rest of my life. Then some specialist bloke realized he could graft a muscle in, like a bionic eye. So I had 5 major operations between the ages of [zero] to 6. They [messed] up the last one and I went half blind. I can kind of see. I can judge when I hit something but that's about it. They made me wear this eye patch on my eye for a year, saying, 'Oh, well, it's just got lazy through all the operations', which was crap because they damaged it. The first operation I had, I was just learning to speak, and apparently I said, 'what do I got?' I didn't know. I woke up and I had this huge thing on my eye, and according to my parents I just doubled and started crying.”

As time progressed, his father who was a salesman for chemical engineering goods used to have their family jump from town to town for more work. Thom was enrolled in many public schools of where he was called a salamander for his disabled eye and isolated from the rest of his classmates. It was when he was about fifteen-years-old that he went to the private and prestigious school Abingdon in Oxfordshire that he said he finally felt happy. This is because he found his first real friend, future bassist of Radiohead Colin Greenwood. Funnily enough, Colin was also teased a lot as a kid for being unnaturally smart for his age. In fact, the first time Thom met his best friend was seeing him run away from a hoard of kids after reminding their teacher they had a large paper due. Both boys were still isolated in Abingdon but being each other’s company soothed a lot of the cruelty from other students. Eventually, the two boys would make a joke of it all and go to parties wearing cat suits while acting incredibly flamboyant. Sometimes even kiss each other to rake out insults from their classmates who already hated them. I suppose they figured if they can’t get people to like them, why not play along? Besides those incidents, Thom still received stares from people due to his eye and whenever Colin wasn’t around, he would usually run off to the all-boys school’s music department and lock himself in a practice room for several hours. It was there that he started to hone his musical talents for his dream of being a rock star. A teacher in that department once described Thom’s behavior, “Thom was always small, physically - rather wiry hair, very unusual-looking because of his paralyzed eye. That made him self-conscious, and he appeared to be rather forlorn and a little isolated. I don’t think Abingdon was the first school where he encountered people looking at him, because he was unhappy before that and was probably teased a bit. But I think he found a haven in the music room. He loved to talk and express his opinions - if you ever got into an argument with Thom, it could be very interesting. But I don’t think he had many people he felt he could confide in. He was a thinker and an experimenter. He wasn’t a great musician - unlike Jonny [Greenwood, Radiohead’s guitarist], for instance - although I think it’s a slight exaggeration when he says he can’t read music. He said he couldn’t sing, but he has a great way of using his voice. People talk about the angst and alienation in his words. Over the years he’s had to release all the frustrations within himself and the pain of the way he’s been treated. He’s a boy I think a lot of people didn’t take much notice of, and of course now everyone does.” Thom always wanted to become a rock star. Like I talked about before with isolation being time to think, Thom used the time he had alone to obsess over the construction of guitars and to start planning his future. When he was seven, he had already written his first song called “Mushroom Cloud” and used to entertain others by using a stick and singing into it. Then, later on Colin and Thom jump into several bands to exercise their dream. Just like me, Thom needed music to be whole. He would listen to The Smiths, REM, U2, and The Pixies with Colin and eventually Colin’s younger brother Jonny Greenwood.

Over time, the other future members of Radiohead, Ed O’Brien (guitarist) and Phil Selway (drummer) met Thom in Abingdon and befriended him. They made him feel a part of something and just like how my friends saved me from the loneliness I was developing from my past; Radiohead’s existence is what really what made Thom’s life turn for the better. That and also the fact that in 1991, the record company EMI had taken a demo tape from Colin and made their dreams come true. As their fame soared with their first single “Creep” and later on again with their second album The Bends being released in 1995, Thom met his idol. REM was Thom’s favorite band in the world from when he was a kid up until this very day. Michael Stipe was his role model, which was funny because Thom typically didn’t believe in role models. When he had the chance to befriend his idol, let his creativity loose, and be the person with all the aspects everyone hated, Thom had his life shift to the way he wanted it to be. He now can laugh at his past, all the people that held him back, because his offbeat thought-process and wonky eye are what most of his fans love the most about him. He is perfection to me because he was able to make imperfection acceptable instead of crumble beneath it.

My life was basically the same as his, even down to the taunting of kids. For some reason, I suppose children just enjoy creating nicknames based off of animals because I used to be called “cow” for my large size and other names for my race. People would literally ignore my existence and sit down, talking to their friend while I cried or use my shirt as a cloth to wipe their hands on. I was also hated for being smart for my age and not understanding American phases. No matter what I did though, I couldn’t change myself. I wasn’t going to just start dieting as an elementary school student to fit in. I don’t know, to me though it would have been sick and wrong to do that. In the end though, all the pain and suffering I had to go through, most of which I don’t even want to recall, made me who I am today. It gave me the friends I have today, it gave me the ability to have the thoughts I do, and it gave me the ability to appreciate all of Radiohead with understanding. All of the members are different but use that aspect of themselves to be amazing. They are constantly praised for their work, even once getting 5,000 awards for their album OK Computer. Many people idolize Thom for his genius. I idolized him for staying the same over so much torture instead of conforming. It makes me glad that I stopped changing myself for others and gives me hope that misery has its rewards in the end of making me the best person I can be thanks to those vapid-minded people. People who never realized they were shaping me for the better. Well, then again, I wonder what most of those bullies think when they see Thom Yorke’s face popping up in yet another magazine for the creativeness he gained from them. I wonder what the girl who rejected Thom in college and caused him to write “Creep” while crying in a bathroom stall thinks now. I wonder what all the boys I used to obsess over would think of me now. All of the people that made me feel as Thom did when he wrote, “I’m a creep. I’m a weirdo. What the hell am I doing here? I don’t belong here.”

There is a term in biology called imprinting. It is when an organism associates itself with another in order to learn from it for survival. This is a basic instinct, yet most people are raised to believe that they stand alone and that they must ‘man-up’ by their merits alone. Imitation is a bad thing. That’s not always true though. The real way people become stronger is from other lives. Both Thom and I need music to be whole, music that is created from other people who were probably influenced by others. It is a never-ending cycle. Humans need each other. “The Eraser”, Thom Yorke’s single from his solo album has the lyrics “Please excuse me but I’ve got to ask, are you only being nice or do you want something? My fairy tale arrow pierces. Be careful how you respond or you might end up in this song. I never get any encouragement and it’s doing me in. The more I try to eraser you the more that you appear.” Perhaps we need to remember the bullies, as bad as this sounds, to be examples of the way humans should not want to end up like. Let’s begrudgingly thank them for teaching us that to be truly happy, we must be strong enough to keep our forms even when slandered agelessly. However, we most importantly need to thank the people who already plowed their obstacles so we won’t one day find ourselves stuck as that lonely, confused being.

We need to learn to forget the past and look forward to that rewarding future. “I Might Be Wrong” from the album Amnesiac, which it’s main them was to stop remembering the past, had the lyrics, “Open up and let me in. Let’s go down the waterfall. Think about the good times and never look back. Never look back.” Thom was referring to those that loved him in the present and how they keep him from revisiting his childhood. The same connection was meant to be made in the song “Lift” when he sang, “This is the place. Sit down, you’re safe now. You’ve been stuck in a lift. We’ve been trying to reach you, Thom... Today is the first day of the rest of your days. So lighten up squirt.” My friends support me in the same fashion and that’s why I feel the lyrics to his solo album’s song “Atoms for Peace” to being almost holy for saying, “No more talk about the old days. It's time for something great. I want you to get out. And make it work. So feel the love come off of them and take me in your arms…I'll be ok.” Our friends are also an important component for making our lives easier. The person I am now is the same as she was before, except she has people who love her for it.

Thom and I. Salamander and Cow. A wonky-eyed, loud-mouthed, over-thinking, overly obsessive, isolated, angry, arrogant, troubled, ugly, hyperactive nuisance and a fat, overly obsessive, over-thinking, weird, ugly, invisible loser. We both continued being who we were. At first, I used to question why I decided to do so but after learning about Thom’s life I learned to love myself and stay strong. He is probably the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. Maybe one day this will serve as a thank you to him, just as he was able to tell Michael Stipe and the rest of Radiohead thank you for saving him. Without the millions of people out there like Thom to be inspired by, I can’t imagine the number of people plummeting into that lonely, confused being that even biology never intended for us to become.